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ABSTRACT

This paper is devoted to a discussion of the conditions which led to a thorough review of the computing and information technology organization, policies, and practices for University of South Carolina-Aiken. The Task Force on Campus Computing was established in the fall of 1994 to address the campus' concerns. Among the concerns were: Computer Services Division's (CSD) control of the purchasing, installation, and maintenance of hardware and software; the administrative control of CSD; the ability of CSD to perform repairs and related functions on a timely basis; and whether or not certain services would be better provided on a contractual basis. Several short-, moderate- and long-term issues are identified. To date, there have been several key opportunities for a broader-based campus group to become involved in the decision-making process related to campus computing. There have also been many more discussions on the campus about the policies which govern the group's activities in this area. The task that remain before the group are the development of a philosophy for campus computing that will guide the institution for the foreseeable future, as well as defining the best organizational structure to accomplish this goal. (MAS)

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Getting Everyone into the Tent (Even if it Takes a Big Top!)

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Overview

Thirty-four years ago, the seeds of rebellion were sown at the University of South Carolina-Aiken (USCA) in the form of a computing support operation grounded in large mainframe computers, complex operating languages, and a priesthood of expertise that exerted itself in every application of computing on the campus. This paper is devoted to a discussion of the conditions which led to a thorough review of the computing and information technology organization, policies and practices for this small, public institution.

Background

USCA is one of eight campuses in the University of South Carolina System and one of only two four-year institutions in that group located outside of Columbia. It serves the southwest region of the state, with baccalaureate degrees in sixteen disciplines, approximately 3,200 undergraduate students, and several graduate programs originating from USC-Columbia. The USC System shares a mainframe-based administrative computing system that provides student, financial, facility, and personnel support for all campuses. The move to personal computing at USCA got a major boost in the early 80's when charges were implemented for academic usage of the mainframe. In an effort to minimize these costs, the Computer Services Division was charged to develop alternatives to the mainframe in an effort to eliminate, or certainly to reduce, these costs. An advisory group composed of the primary computer users at the time was formed, and an alternative strategy was developed to make extensive use of PC's wherever possible. This served as the initial decision on the campus to move into the "PC Revolution." In a sense, we established a pattern that involvement in these decisions may require a level of expertise that the newcomer could not approach.

So, beginning in the early 1980's, USCA, like most other higher education institutions, began a slow transition from the environment that made this organizational style sensible to one in which personal computers are standard office equipment. Similarly, the changes manifested themselves in the myriad software programs that enable users not only to define their needs, but to dramatically increase the manipulations possible with it. The transition, it turns out, was so slow that many of the support mechanisms and operating styles that had characterized a complex and controlled approach to computing were applied to the new way of performing these functions with little or no review of their continued usefulness.

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Problems Defined

At USC-Aiken, these issues, along with those associated with decision making authority, control of purchasing processes, and access to resources all became a point of major concern in the Fall of 1994. The Academic Council, composed of the heads and chairs of the academic units on the campus, began the development of a statement of their concerns with the structure, role, and leadership provided by CSD. Among the concerns were: CSD's control of the purchasing, installation, and maintenance of hardware and software; the administrative control of CSD, the ability of CSD to perform repairs and related functions on a timely basis, and whether or not certain services would be better provided on a contractual basis.

The tone and the depth of the distress were at a level that the Chancellor (the chief executive officer for the campus) put out a call for volunteers from across the campus to serve on a Task Force on Campus Computing. The group, with representatives from academic, as well as administrative, units, was formed in December 1994 and charged to "provide immediate counsel on operational issues in areas identified by the Computer Services Division or by members of the Task Force, and (to) develop a philosophy and action plans for future operations of campus computing that will meet the diverse needs of our institution," and to develop an interim report by May 15, 1995, with a final report due by December 15, 1995. To be included in the final report were to be "a plan for assuring the on-going assessment of satisfaction by all user groups..., as well as alternative strategies to meet the known and anticipated needs of the campus community in the area of information technology." The two senior administrators with responsibilities in these areas were named to co-chair the group.

The first sessions of the Task Force were dedicated to definition of the issues. Within two meetings, the group had determined that there were three general categories of concerns:

1. Issues of Short-Term Demand or Duration (those items which have a near-term solution ready to be proposed or fine-tuned, and which have the potential to be addressed before the end of the semester)

   Policies governing the purchase, installation, inventory control of software, and the timeliness with which it is handled

   Training (Initial and upgrading training for faculty, staff and students) Student Internet access policy

   Student access to laser printing after-hours Off-campus access (by faculty, staff and students) to computing resources

2. Moderate-Term Issues (Those items which are of immediate importance and which, due to the complexity or the requirements of gathering information about existing practices, may not lend themselves to recommendations in the near term. It was expected that issues in the category should result in recommendations for action no later than the end of the Spring Semester.)

   Excessive lag time in repairs

Need for improvement in "customer service attitude" on the part of CSD Staff and student workers

Value of campus standards for hardware and software; multimedia standards

Need for improved procedures for ordering, installing, and providing inventory control for computer hardware

Computer lab policies and staffing

Subcontracting some or all repairs

Campus-wide information service: gopher/www home page

3. Long-Term Issues (Those issues which demand immediate attention and considerable deliberation in order to develop the understanding and to set the `overarching' policies and priorities that will govern campus computing at USCA.)

Development of campus and departmental information technology plans, resource allocations for information technology, migration planning for hardware and software, and allocation of computing resources

Separation of policy/planning versus implementation/delivery, create Chief Information Officer for campus, and academic/administrative computing under same management

Use of students in instructional support in relation to students in installation/repair/out-of-class support roles

The agreement under which the smaller groups were developed included an understanding that any changes to existing policy or practice, or any recommendations for future actions, would be brought back to the full Task Force for consideration.

Progress To Date

To date, there have been several key opportunities for a broader-based campus group to become involved in the decision-making process related to campus computing. There also have been many more discussions on the campus about the policies that govern our activities in this area than has been the case in some time. It should be noted that many of the policies and practices in place have been acknowledged to be effective until additional resources or alternatives could be developed.

What remains before the group are the toughest tasks: the development of a philosophy for campus computing that will guide the institution for the foreseeable future, as well as defining the best organizational structure to get us there. The ideas generated to date, which have not been forwarded for approval address the following points:

The campus is in need of a clear statement about the role of Information Technology (IT) in our mission. It should be unavoidable for a faculty or staff member or a student to become aware of the possibilities of this medium for the educational process.

In addition to an operating philosophy, there must be training and developmental opportunities for all campus citizens that will instill and nurture an appreciation for IT.

Planning for the best use of IT will be located at the unit level whenever possible, to assure the best application to the needs identified.

There must be resources committed on a regular basis for IT investments, rather than working from left-over funds or one-time allocations. Additionally, there must be some level of resource commitment over which the planning unit exercises final authority. This not only validates the planning process, it also creates a sense of ownership and control that is not present if the resource decisions are all made at a higher level.

Whatever the role of a central authority in IT, there must be a sense of value- added for it to be perceived as worthy of support. This translates into appropriate leadership into new developments, a readily apparent customer service attitude, strong infrastructure support, and an unwavering commitment to making the users the experts in their applications as opposed to the hat-in-hand seekers of good favor from CSD. Common Perceptions

In closing, it seems appropriate to quote from a recent presentation at CAUSE related to restructuring a similar unit at Depaul University (Chan, 1995). Dr. Chan notes that a similar process at her institution has resulted in a better understanding of the direction for the unit, increased productivity, new prospects for action and continued improvement. It is our hope at USCA that we could boast of similar outcomes.

Chan goes on to note that there are four considerations that must be addressed in any such undertaking, and we have made every effort to incorporate these concepts into our work:

Commitment to change from the chief operating officer and throughout the organization is critical to any successful restructuring effort.

Understanding that recommendations must incorporate the ability for continued develop and change rather than approaching outcomes as a final solution.

Communications among the participants and the campus community are critical to prevent surprises and resistance as outcomes emerge.

Providing people with the tools and the experiences necessary for their success in a new role is crucial to acceptance of sweeping change, by those directly affected, as well as by those who see it from afar. Conclusions

It is our sincere hope at USCA that the mechanisms we have put in place to address stated concerns will enable us to create a new support structure for IT on our campus that builds upon the distributed expertise, demands, and interest that we find there today. As opposed to our earlier model, we are now looking for ways to validate the ability of units to define and implement their plans for IT. Before the end of 1995, there should be a clear indicator of the future path that this technology will take on our campus, and it will have been developed BY the people and units impacted, rather than FOR them.

REFERENCE

Chan, S. S. (1995). Strategies for restructuring IT organizations. Proceedings of the 1994 Cause Conference: New Opportunities for Partnering, VII-8-(1-9).